United Nations A/59/374

General Assembly

Distr.: General
21 September 2004

Original: English

Fifty-ninth session
Agenda Item 39 (a)
Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance: strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations

International cooperation on humanitarian assistance in the field of natural disasters, from relief to development

Report of the Secretary-General*

Summary

The present report has been prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution 58/25, in which the Assembly requested a report on the progress made in improving international response to natural disasters. The report also updates the activities of the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group, in response to General Assembly resolution 57/150 and other subsequent Assembly decisions on this subject.

The report highlights some of the key activities undertaken to respond to natural disasters during the reporting period with particular emphasis on disaster response, recovery and transition efforts and global initiatives to reduce risk.

* The report was delayed for technical reasons.

04-51828 (E) 211004

I. Introduction

1. The present report has been prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution 58/25, in which the General Assembly requested a report on progress made on improving international response to natural disasters.

2. The report also includes an update of the activities of the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG), in response to General Assembly resolution 57/150.

3. A number of issues relevant to the report are also addressed in the reports of the Secretary-General on strengthening the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations (A/59/93-E/2004/74) and on the implementation of the international strategy for disaster reduction (A/59/228).

II. The year in review

4. The large number and scale of natural disasters are having an increasing human and financial impact, resulting in massive loss of life and property worldwide. It is often those communities most prone to natural hazards that are least able to cope with their effects, resulting in long-term negative social, economic and environmental consequences. In 2003 and 2004, it is estimated that natural disasters claimed the lives of 75,000 people, affected more than 284 million people and caused more than $65 billion worth of material damage. Overall trends indicate that the frequency of natural disasters and the number of people affected have increased sharply during the past 30 years, but that interventions, such as early warning and food aid, have maintained the death toll at a relatively steady level.

5. On 26 December 2003, a devastating earthquake struck the city of Bam in the Islamic Republic of Iran, destroying 85 per cent of the city, killing more than 26,000 people and injuring more than 30,000 others. Two months later, on 24 February 2004, an earthquake occurred close to the port city Al Hoceima, Morocco, killing more than 600, injuring 900 and displacing 15,000 people.

6. Intense monsoons in July 2004 led to serious flooding in South Asia, killing more than 2,000 people, affecting more than 50 million people and causing severe damage to public infrastructure, including roads and railways. South-East Nepal was the hardest hit, with an estimated 130,000 people affected and roughly 38,000 families displaced. In Bangladesh, more than 33 million people have been affected and about 5 million people are in urgent need of food, as well as other relief items. Flooding in the Dominican Republic and Haiti in November 2003 and May 2004 killed more than 1,059 people and affected 6,226 families. Severe flooding in Argentina and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia caused infrastructural damage to roads and bridges, as well as to agricultural facilities. In Peru, severe cold and snowstorms in July 2004 killed 90 and affected 337,467 people. A heat wave in Europe in the summer of 2003 reportedly led to more than 20,000 deaths. To these examples can be added hundreds of smaller-scale disasters, many of which go unreported and therefore are not included in global disaster statistics.

7. Erratic and inadequate rainfall in the Horn of Africa perpetuates drought conditions in the region. Although international efforts to address and fund structural obstacles to food security averted a major famine from the drought that

began in 2002, food shortages continue to threaten millions with hunger. Malnutrition and extreme poverty have caused mass population movements in search of safer and more fertile ground. The United Nations 2004 Humanitarian Appeal estimates that almost 2 million people in Eritrea, 5 million people in Ethiopia and 1.3 million people in Somalia are in need of immediate emergency aid. In Kenya, the recent combination of endemic drought, premature ending of the long rains and blight on existing grain stores has put approximately 2.3 million people in immediate need of food assistance.

8. Although the situation in Southern Africa has improved considerably since the devastating drought and food crisis of 2002-2003, the situation remains precarious in many parts of the region due to the lethal mix of erratic weather patterns, high HIV/AIDS prevalence rates, restrictive land reform policies and weak governance. Poor harvests — notably in Lesotho, southern Malawi and Swaziland — combined with depleted productive capacity continue to erode previous nutritional gains and undermine prospects of sustainable livelihoods for millions of vulnerable people. Careful monitoring of food security in the region is critical, in the light of increasingly restrictive government policies and practices that are limiting humanitarian food aid, access to vulnerable populations and the collection of credible information on needs, vulnerabilities and capacities.

9. West Africa is currently facing a worsening locust crisis, which is causing significant crop damage. The worst affected country is currently Mauritania, while the situation is also deteriorating in Mali and the Niger. Locust swarms have also been reported in Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Chad and Senegal. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has warned that the locust situation could further deteriorate in the next few weeks, with new swarms starting to form in September, seriously threatening crops that will be ready for harvest.

10. Epidemics and newly-emerging infections continue to threaten the health of people around the world. Globalization, climate change, the growth of mega-cities and an explosive increase in international travel are increasing the potential for rapid spread of infection. Deforestation and urban sprawl bring humans and animals in closer contact and allow new epidemics to emerge. Many of these epidemics, such as cholera and meningitis, recurrently challenge health systems in countries with limited resources, which are already strained by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Other epidemics, such as influenza and dengue, have an increasing potential to create new pandemics. The return of yellow fever threatens large cities in the developing world, while the emergence and rapid spread of drug-resistant tuberculosis and malaria increase treatment costs dramatically. Travel, trade and tourism are all affected by emerging and epidemic disease threats.

11. As such events attest, the growing number of hazards and their increasingly damaging effects on vulnerable populations are cause for great global concern. A number of trends suggest that the situation is likely to get worse. Short-sighted policies and unsustainable development practices, such as uncontrolled urbanization and deforestation, continue, and the Earth's climate is very likely to change, owing to increases in concentration of atmospheric greenhouse gases caused mostly by burning fossil fuels. Authoritative predictions point to rising temperatures and sea levels and to greater intensity and incidence of extreme weather events, such as storms, floods, droughts and heat waves. Adverse socio-economic impacts are likely to result, including changes in agricultural production patterns that, in turn, will

have implications for livelihoods and migration patterns. Growing competition for the exploitation and the control of natural resources is often a factor in the outbreak or continuation of armed conflict.

12. Most worrying is the fact that developing countries are disproportionately affected. Natural hazards themselves — earthquakes, volcanoes, hurricanes and cyclones — do not necessarily lead to disasters themselves. Rather, hazards become disasters when they impact the people and the assets that are susceptible to their destructive effects. This is often due to unhelpful international and local policies and practices, such as inappropriate land use and poor building construction, which exacerbate vulnerability and erosion of the natural resource base. A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, issued in 2004, *Reducing Disaster Risk: A Challenge for Development*, concluded that natural hazards of similar intensities produce more devastation in lower income countries. For example, countries classified as having low human development account for more than 53 per cent of total recorded deaths, despite representing only 11 per cent of the world's hazard-exposed populations. In other words, it is the poor and vulnerable who are most prone to environmental degradation and natural hazards, and who are likely to suffer the consequences, through death and displacement and the systematic loss of development gains. Mitigating the adverse effects of disasters is therefore inextricably linked to promoting sustainable development and achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

13. What is therefore required to both improve humanitarian assistance to disasters and accelerate progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals is a comprehensive two-pronged approach that puts energy and resources into preparedness for catastrophic events, while simultaneously investing in mitigation and development processes that aim to reduce risk. Building the capacity of Member States and regional organizations in disaster management and supporting national and regional risk reduction activities are also critical to ensuring that such approaches endure.

III. Update of activities: from relief to development

A. Emergency management and response coordination

14. The timely and effective response of Governments and the international community to natural disasters continued to be critical to saving lives and mitigating the immediate effects of emergencies.

15. From September 2003 to the end of August 2004, the United Nations assisted countries and regions affected by more than 50 natural disasters, in response to 20 international appeals launched by Member States. Efforts to coordinate the response of the United Nations system to natural disasters have included the launch of four United Nations inter-agency flash appeals — for the Bam earthquake, the Madagascar cyclone, the Bangladesh floods and the Kenya drought.

16. Since September 2003, United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC), a network of 180 disaster management professionals from 57 countries, coordinated the response to 10 disasters, including floods in the Sudan, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Bangladesh, earthquakes in the Islamic Republic of

Iran, Morocco and Colombia, and typhoons in Micronesia (twice) and Vanuatu. Such efforts were supported by the World Food Programme (WFP), which worked in coordination with Governments to provide more than 30 million people in response to natural disasters in Southern Africa, the Horn of Africa, Mauritania, Madagascar, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Haiti, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and East Timor, and by the United Nations Children's Fund, which supported national emergency efforts to restore essential services and infrastructure in the areas of health, nutrition, water and sanitation, education and child protection.

17. Increasingly, the United Nations is trying to expand the participation of Member States in its disaster response networks and to foster a regional approach to natural disaster response, particularly among low-income countries. During the past year, UNDAC was able to expand its network by adding emergency managers from the Asia-Pacific region to the network, and will be holding an induction course for its new African emergency manager members in Addis Ababa in November 2004.

18. The World Health Organization (WHO) offers assistance to affected States by procuring medicines and medical supplies; rehabilitating health facilities and training health staff; ensuring routine immunization; strengthening disease surveillance systems; enabling control and response to communicable disease outbreaks; collaborating for environmental health and water and sanitation interventions; conducting health assessments and providing technical advice; facilitating health sector coordination; providing guidance for responding to the health needs of women and HIV/AIDS prevention in emergency settings; contributing to crisis-preparedness work and post-crisis recovery through medical screening of ex-combatants; and fundraising to assist Member States address the urgent health needs of the affected populations, as well as to pave the way to recovery of the health sector.

B. Drought response

19. Droughts pose unique response challenges, as they are often slow in onset, long and recurring in duration and often involve an interplay between natural and man-made causes. In addition, drought may compound conflict and can contribute to the onset of a complex emergency by triggering a fight over scarce resources, aggravating existing instability and further threatening those in power. The combined effects of these chronic shocks contribute to a deteriorating humanitarian condition, the breakdown of economic, political and social systems and the slow erosion of development gains. Response, therefore, demands an overall strategy that addresses emergency food needs, chronic food insecurity and famine response measures, including food assistance, health interventions and livestock vaccination.

20. The elements described above are all at play in the Horn of Africa, where the prolonged effects of chronic drought, flooding and insecurity have disrupted farming patterns and have caused erratic population movements, have eroded food security and livelihood capacities, have caused widespread malnutrition and have impeded recovery. In 2004, the United Nations, together with its non-governmental organization and Government partners, has tried to meet the needs of acutely vulnerable groups by issuing consolidated humanitarian appeals for $147 million in humanitarian assistance to Eritrea, $85 million to Ethiopia and $111 million to

Somalia, and to maintain food distribution throughout the region while mitigating the nutrition and health effects of water and food shortages. The alarming situation in Kenya led to the issuance of a flash appeal on 10 August 2004, which will, if necessary, be followed by a consolidated appeal for 2005. A total of $97 million was appealed for in order to respond to the acute needs of up to 2.3 million people hit by severe drought, crop failure, contaminated maize stocks and resulting abnormally high grain prices. Joint initiatives between the international community, donors and affected Governments, such as the Kenya Food Security Meeting, the New Coalition for Food and Livelihood Security in Ethiopia, the safety net programme in Eritrea and the Famine and Food Security Initiative in the Horn of Africa, aim to find longer-term solutions by ending the cycle of famine and improving long-term food and livelihoods security.

21. In Southern Africa, following an enormous humanitarian effort during 2002 and 2003, which helped to significantly reduce the impact of massive food shortages and prevent further deterioration of vulnerable communities, the United Nations, in collaboration with NGO partners and the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), prepared a plan to address critical needs in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe, requesting $419 million, primarily for food and emergency agricultural assistance and for support for social services such as health and education, and water and sanitation. The plan follows the approach outlined by the plan of the United Nations Special Envoy for Humanitarian Needs in Southern Africa, which calls for actions that address the emergency needs of vulnerable populations while simultaneously taking action to address long-term regional needs.

22. In addition, WFP is currently exploring the feasibility of acute hunger insurance as a financial tool to help mitigate the effects of extreme weather variations in drought-prone areas. As a first step, WFP is developing a weather index for Ethiopia that is designed to identify different levels of risk for weather variations, identify the population that needs to be safeguarded against hunger and calculate the cost of this protection for each risk level. Using this model, WFP, in partnership with the World Bank and the private insurance sector, intends to develop a formal mechanism that will build this risk — and its associated costs — into agency and donor country plans as an insurance policy for vulnerable populations against extreme weather conditions. This will allow for a reserve of "on call" contingency funds to cover deepening levels of vulnerability in the case of extreme weather conditions.

C. Local and regional capacity-building

23. By virtue of their immediate proximity to disasters and their knowledge of local infrastructure, national and local response teams will always be an important first line of defence against the destructive impact of natural disasters. Moreover, it is increasingly recognized by the Governments of disaster-prone countries, donors and international response agencies that building local capacity to prepare against and mitigate disasters is critical to reducing risk.

24. To address this, several capacity-building programmes to strengthen response preparedness were initiated in 2003-2004 in different regions and countries worldwide. To improve local response capacity, UNDAC teams were also sent to Colombia and the Philippines as part of regional INSARAG training exercises to

introduce new on-site coordination methodologies to disaster-prone countries and to train national authorities in international response coordination. UNDP provided regional training on risk reduction methods to reduce the effects of climate change in the Caribbean, established a framework for risk reduction in Colombia and supported the integration of risk reduction measures into the national housing strategy in Cuba. In Africa, UNDP and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) conducted a comparative analysis of urban risk in major urban centres and began to develop appropriate actions for reducing this risk. In addition, UNDP supported the development of institutional and legislative systems for risk reduction in Albania, conducted flood risk preparedness exercises in Tajikistan and supported the strengthening of an external disaster reduction knowledge network for Central Asia. WHO promoted the topic of disaster mitigation in health facilities in Central America in the form of revised construction codes and norms for building health facilities. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) provided training workshops and information support to improve early warning systems in numerous countries.

25. At the regional level, the international network of United Nations regional disaster response advisers focused on strengthening regional mechanisms to address all phases of disaster management. For example, in September 2003, the regional disaster response advisers for the Americas conducted contingency planning workshops with country teams and local entities in Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Panama, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic, and formed a regional group for risk and disaster management which came together to discuss common issues, such as civil-military assistance in disaster response in Latin America.

26. In Asia, the Asian Disaster Reduction Centre and regional disaster response advisers for Asia jointly organized a regional conference in Kobe, Japan, in December 2003, inviting Governments, NGOs, international organizations, the media and scientific and academic institutions to share best practices and initiatives in the region and facilitated disaster management training and workshops for United Nations country teams and Governments in Cambodia and Myanmar.

27. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat regional office in South Africa is working in support of resident coordinators to improve regional and country ability to respond to disasters that address the unique vulnerabilities that prevail in Southern Africa. For example, with the Office's support, the SADC vulnerability assessment committees have begun an assessment of regional and national vulnerabilities to drought, including specific links with the HIV/AIDS crisis.

D. Risk reduction and mitigation

28. "Disaster risk reduction" describes measures taken in advance to curb disaster losses, through reducing exposure and susceptibility of populations to natural hazards and enhancing their coping and adaptive capacity. There is increasing recognition of the importance of risk reduction in disaster-prone countries, prompting numerous global efforts to reduce risk, particularly under the umbrella of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction.

29. The Strategy is guided by the Inter-Agency Task Force on Disaster Reduction, whose members include United Nations agencies, regional organizations and civil

society organizations, and it plays a key role in advocacy and coordination. In addition, a specific tripartite collaboration arrangement is maintained between the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNDP and the Strategy secretariat in order to strengthen the effectiveness of the United Nations in reducing disaster risk and vulnerability and incorporating risk-reduction strategies into all phases of disaster management.

30. Strengthening early warning and risk assessment systems is a priority, as global disaster trends suggest that improved early warning systems, including prediction and alert systems, educational programmes and designated evacuation routes and safe havens, have been instrumental in reducing disaster-related casualties during the past 30 years. In October 2003, the Strategy held the Second International Conference on Early Warning to emphasize the need to better target early warning systems to disaster-prone countries and to better translate early warnings into early action. As a result of the conference, a platform to promote early warning has been set up in Bonn, Germany, under the Strategy secretariat. It will build links among the many early warning programmes of United Nations agencies, such as WMO weather programmes and the FAO Global Information and Early Warning System on food insecurity, with a view to facilitating joint efforts for improved services to Member States and the development of an inter-agency humanitarian early warning web platform, to be led by WFP, to facilitate access to and use of early warning information by the larger humanitarian community.

31. To improve risk assessment models, UN-Habitat and UNDP, in collaboration with the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre and the Organization of American States (OAS), have taken the lead in the development of an inventory of risk analysis and vulnerability assessment tools, particularly for local and urban applications. The first phase of the project will be completed in 2004. In addition, UNDP has begun the development of a global disaster risk index, which measures the relative vulnerability of countries to three key natural hazards (earthquakes, tropical cyclones and floods), identifies development factors that contribute to increased risk levels and demonstrates how countries with similar levels of exposure to natural hazards often experience widely differing impacts. In addition, FAO has developed emergency needs assessment guidelines. This livelihoods-based approach to assessment contributes to the objectives of supporting disaster mitigation and preparedness as it increases the understanding of the roles played by social groups, stakeholders and local institutions in the different phases of disaster risk management, as well as coping capacities of rural populations.

32. There is also growing recognition of the need to integrate disaster risk reduction into development processes as a means of achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The report *Reducing Disaster Risk: A Challenge for Development*, launched by UNDP, with the support of UNEP and the Strategy secretariat, concludes that while exposure to some hazards is inevitable, susceptibility to their disastrous effects is not automatic, and that good development practices can intervene to avoid the translation of physical exposure into disastrous events.

33. Such conclusions have prompted initiatives to integrate risk reduction into development practices. For example, in 2004, a partnership was formed between the Strategy, the African Union, the New Partnership for Africa's Development secretariat, UNDP and the World Bank to develop the African Regional Strategy for

Disaster Risk Reduction. This approach was endorsed by the African heads of State in Addis Ababa in July 2004. To ensure that disaster risk management is a key consideration within sustainable agriculture and rural development policies and programmes, FAO has decided to further strengthen its policy advisory and technical activities in countries that are especially prone to natural hazards.

34. As a measure to reduce risk, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, together with the United Nations Environment Programme, is addressing environmental considerations that are central to effective disaster mitigation and response. A major step forward has been the launch of a new global environmental emergencies partnership, which supports risk-reduction efforts through practical initiatives that strengthen collaboration and information-sharing between international, national and regional environmental emergency stakeholders.

IV. Improving the effectiveness and the efficiency of international urban search and rescue assistance

35. The International Search and Rescue Advisory Group is an intergovernmental network under the United Nations umbrella responsible for urban search and rescue and related disaster response issues. Its purpose is to provide a platform for information exchange, to define standards for international urban search and rescue assistance and to develop a methodology for international cooperation and coordination in earthquake response. The INSARAG network includes earthquake-prone countries as well as traditional providers of international assistance.

36. During the reporting period, INSARAG was particularly instrumental in responding to the earthquakes in Bam, Islamic Republic of Iran, in December 2003 and in Al Hoceima, Morocco, in February 2004, when international search and rescue teams worked in support of the affected Governments and national and local response teams to rescue people trapped under collapsed urban structures. The response was followed by "lessons learned" meetings organized by the INSARAG secretariat (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), which brought together the affected Governments and international, national and local response teams to evaluate the earthquake response and to make recommendations for inclusion in the INSARAG guidelines, which are currently being revised accordingly.

37. To improve local response capacity, UNDAC teams were also sent to Colombia and the Philippines as part of regional INSARAG training exercises to introduce new on-site coordination methodologies to disaster-prone countries and to train national authorities in international response coordination. INSARAG also organized regional meetings in Kobe, Japan (November 2003), Tunis (April 2004), Lima (August 2004) and Singapore (September 2004) to discuss regional cooperation, with an emphasis on national capacity-building for emergency response preparedness.

38. In addition, the INSARAG secretariat, supported by the Governments of the Republic of Korea and Singapore, organized meetings of all international urban search and rescue team leaders worldwide in Seoul (November 2003) and Singapore (September 2004) to enable the emergency response practitioners to discuss technical and operational collapsed structure rescue issues in order to improve

performance standards of international urban search and rescue teams and their coordination on site in an emergency. In order to expand its activities, INSARAG established an INSARAG sub-office in Tunis in April 2004 and conducted an INSARAG familiarization module for Central and Southern European countries in Hungary in February 2004 and for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries in Indonesia in May 2004.

V. Emerging issues and challenges

39. Despite much progress during the past year, there remain fundamental challenges to improving preparedness, response and risk-reduction efforts. In this regard, donor and disaster-prone Governments, together with the United Nations system and its partners, can collectively play a critical role in addressing these issues, improving the management of disasters and ultimately saving lives.

A. Strengthening emergency response

1. Improving response coordination

40. An ongoing challenge for international disaster response networks, such as UNDAC and INSARAG, is how to more effectively coordinate relief personnel and assets in a sudden-onset emergency. Scores of local, national and international relief teams converge on the scene, and Governments supply relief supplies and assets, often without a clear sense of what kind of aid is most needed and where. Rather than contribute to the overall relief effort, the presence of so many actors from different countries with a variety of levels of training and expertise often leads to confusion and duplication of effort and becomes more a burden than an asset.

41. A particular concern that has arisen is the over-deployment of international search and rescue teams in the aftermath of an earthquake. Because such deployment is often dictated by bilateral agreements between countries, it is difficult for international coordination networks to limit the use of such teams. INSARAG had some success during the Bam earthquake in limiting the number of search and rescue teams by informally sharing information through a virtual on-site operations coordination centre (www.reliefweb.int/virtualosocc/login.asp). However, a more formal mechanism is needed to ensure that coordination mechanisms are in place to advise Governments on the timing and the use of their search and rescue assistance.

2. Resolving administrative bottlenecks

42. Safe, immediate and unhindered access to disaster sites and affected communities is critical to a timely and effective response, particularly in sudden-onset disasters such as earthquakes, where the difference between life and death can literally be measured in a couple of hours. This was demonstrated in the aftermath of both the Bam and Al Hoceima earthquakes, when the Governments of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Morocco waived visa requirements so that international search and rescue teams could gain access to the disaster site quickly. Resolving such administrative issues ahead of such an emergency would further reduce confusion, shorten response time and ease operations.

43. In its resolution 57/150, the General Assembly urged Member States to simplify or reduce administrative procedures related to the entry, deployment and exit of international urban search and rescue teams with their supplies and equipment. At present, only the Government of New Zealand has clear guidelines on this issue. It is important that disaster-prone countries follow suit and establish measures and guidelines that facilitate secure and quick access to disaster sites by relief teams when disasters strike.

3. Incorporating risk reduction into response

44. Responses to disasters and recovery projects can themselves prolong or create new risk, such as relocating flood victims to areas with inadequate facilities, over-emphasizing food assistance at the expense of other needs or creating aid dependencies that work against populations re-establishing their own livelihoods. Conversely, disasters can open up unique opportunities for systemic, institutional and practical changes that can reduce risk and lead to sustainable development.

45. It is therefore critical that risk reduction concerns are taken into consideration in the preparedness and response phases of a disaster. Better guidelines and tools to do so need to be developed and disseminated. At the international level, this includes better preparedness efforts on the part of the United Nations country teams through (a) improved early warning and contingency planning; (b) pre-determined roles and responsibilities among relief agencies, civil society groups, regional disaster response advisers and Governments; (c) advance identification of potential areas and types of vulnerability; (d) opening up communication channels to facilitate information and data exchange; and (e) prepositioning funding and supplies and determining the terms and mechanisms for their quick release.

46. Also critical to risk reduction is ensuring that vulnerable countries and regions can respond speedily to sudden-onset disasters in their proximity. This entails building and supporting a sustainable local capacity for both preparedness and response through material and technical support and through training. Such efforts would also improve overall response by promoting a stronger national role in international and regional response coordination when dozens of assistance groups rush to the field.

47. Disasters are often of a regional scale, requiring regionally based efforts to reduce risk. Regular flooding of the Zambezi and Okavango river basins systematically destroys crops, homes and livelihoods in most of central Africa. Drought conditions throughout Southern Africa have had far-reaching effects on food security, health, nutrition and livelihoods. Mudslides in Central America, prompted by hurricane Mitch, consumed parts of the Pan-American Highway, rendering one of the most important commercial routes of the region impassable. Regional consultation, cooperation and planning, combined with political and financial commitments, can do much to promote a coherent approach to risk reduction, streamline donor assistance and create a framework for sharing costs, information and infrastructure towards building disaster-resilient communities region-wide.

B. Funding

1. Strengthening emergency funding

48. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has benefited from individual arrangements with the Governments of Norway, Italy, Denmark, the Netherlands and the Government of Ireland to provide reserve funds in the Office's Trust Fund for Disaster Relief. This arrangement has enabled the Office to respond immediately to the most pressing needs of disaster victims. In view of this positive experience, the Office hopes to interest additional donors in this scheme.

49. In addition, in the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster, the Office can provide from its regular budget emergency cash grants of up to $50,000 to affected countries. These grants are particularly effective because they can rapidly be used for the local purchase and delivery of life-saving relief supplies. The cash grant is also crucial because it can help buy time by bridging the immediate funding gap, pending the response of the international donor community. This emergency cash grant has its origin in General Assembly resolution 2816 (XXVI). While the total amount of the grant has been expanded to $1.5 million in funds from the United Nations regular biennial budget, the ceiling of $50,000 has not been changed since 1983.

50. However, natural disaster response experiences, most recently those derived from the Bam earthquake, demonstrate that the maximum of $50,000 emergency cash grant is not sufficient and frequently is far below what would be effective in the absence of alternative means of immediate relief. It is therefore necessary to raise the cash grant ceiling to the more appropriate level of $100,000 per disaster in the affected country, within the existing resources available in the regular budget. This issue was already taken up and endorsed by the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 2004/____.

2. Funding risk reduction

51. Funding for natural disasters tends to be focused on the immediate, high-profile response phase, rather than on preparedness, mitigation and other risk-reduction activities. However, investing in long-term disaster-reduction efforts is potentially a more cost-effective means of saving lives, as it preserves developmental and financial investments that otherwise might be lost. Such trends suggest that a new approach is needed to both raise overall awareness of and funding levels for natural disasters and to channel a larger proportion of these funds to risk reduction efforts. For example, during this period, UNDP provided more than 40 emergency cash grants to countries affected by natural disasters. These cash grants were used to support the coordination function of the resident coordinator system, to jump-start the early recovery planning process and to integrate risk reduction concerns into recovery efforts from a very early stage.

C. Information management

52. Access to timely, reliable and accurate information is critical to improving emergency response, maximizing resources and minimizing risk and human suffering. Equally critical is the preparation, coordination and broad sharing of

baseline data, including national and subnational demographic data, vulnerability assessments and early warning analysis.

53. While there are several subnational, national and global initiatives that compile, compare and analyse disaster-related data, in most cases they have been developed independently, using different criteria and formats, with different purposes in mind. While individually useful, inconsistencies, data gaps and ambiguity of terminology make comparisons and use of the different data sets difficult. This can lead to much confusion in the perception and the evaluation of a disaster situation, and poses a severe obstacle to planning, decision-making and fundraising, potentially at the expense of lives.

54. As a means of improving the quality, coverage and accuracy of disaster data and assessing future risk at multiple levels, a sub-working group within the Inter-Agency Task Force on Disaster Reduction is working to standardize, aggregate and link disaster-related data from different sources by reviewing and identifying disaster datasets and methodologies, by developing standards for defining, identifying and recording natural and man-made disasters, such as the global unique disaster identifier, and by developing indicators and indexes for global risk assessment.

55. What is needed at this stage to further improve disaster-related data is an effort to aggregate local, national and global disaster data into a widely accessible global disaster database. This would greatly improve international, regional and national disaster managers to accurately document and analyse the losses associated with natural hazards worldwide. In addition, more resources should be dedicated to the analysis of information on disasters and their immediate and longer-term impacts, such as more hazard-specific analysis of risk and an overall assessment of the cost-effectiveness of risk reduction. Such analysis could be used as a means of informing the investment and the policy priorities of international and national assistance organizations, donors and affected States.

D. Improving post-disaster transition

56. Disaster response tends to be dominated by relief interventions in the acute emergency phase, often to the exclusion of inputs needed to support an appropriate recovery. National Government services and physical infrastructure have often been eroded or destroyed, individual assets have been depleted and social support systems are under stress. People who have been displaced by disasters want to return home or to establish themselves in new communities. In addition to being an important stage in community rehabilitation, the early recovery phase presents an important opportunity for implementing risk reduction measures in high-risk countries, such as environmentally friendly land-use policies, appropriate building standards, construction, preparedness training and support for national structures, with potential long-term benefits.

57. The international community, led by the United Nations system, can help support such transitions. However, there remains a resources and planning gap between disaster relief and recovery phases, and awareness of the potentials of transition as an opportunity for development among Governments, multilateral financial institutions and donors remains low.

1. Bridging the funding gap

58. Most resources mobilized for natural disaster situations are tagged for either emergency assistance or long-term reconstruction and are not easily applied to transition purposes. Moreover, there are no formal fundraising mechanisms dedicated to raising transition funds.

59. To bridge this funding gap, the international community should explore the relative merits of developing a new funding mechanism for disaster recovery or integrating natural disaster recovery requirements into long-term donor assistance strategies and plans.

2. Addressing the planning gap

60. Transition planning would gain from clarifying what transition actually entails, as well as from bridging this institutional gap through closer cooperation among humanitarian and development partners on recovery issues, greater synchronization of geographic and sectoral planning and fund-raising tools, more coherent needs assessments and prioritization and a focus on programmes and projects that reduce vulnerability.

61. Moreover, unlike in post-conflict situations, national authorities are often in the best position to take the lead in carrying out post-disaster recovery and reconstruction activities. The international community, led by the United Nations system, must support national structures to be able to carry out reconstruction activities, particularly in regions susceptible to recurring disasters.

3. Using the recovery phase as an opportunity for risk reduction

62. The post-crisis phase following a natural disaster is a critical period for initiating risk reduction efforts. The tragedy of human and financial loss is still fresh in the minds of the media, the international community and local populations, and the will of Government to prevent future catastrophes is likely to be strong. It is important to take advantage of this period to enact institutional and practical change in the name of reducing future risk.

63. For example, the early stages of post-crisis rehabilitation are critical for introducing new approaches to urban governance and planning, such as building codes, construction standards and zoning and urban expansion. For example, following the devastating earthquake in Bam, UN-Habitat, in cooperation with UNDP and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, prepared a reconstruction strategy for shelter and local government capacity-building. In Haiti, UN-Habitat provided support and substantive input on human settlements issues, as part of the two-year recovery framework following the July 2004 floods.

64. If efforts are made to (a) support local and national recovery processes at an early stage, (b) consider risk and vulnerability reduction in all recovery activities, and (c) enhance the relationships between, and build on, the comparative advantages of development and humanitarian actors, it may be possible to close the gap between relief and development, pre-empt the resumption of activities that contribute to risk, prevent the re-emergence of disaster risk and transform crisis into opportunities for sustained development.

E. Tackling the hard questions

65. To date, the debate on risk reduction has tended to focus on humanitarian and development solutions, neglecting the equally important political angle of the risk reduction agenda. As a result, many fundamental risk-reduction issues are not being pursued because they often entail addressing deep structural issues or policy measures that are politically difficult to achieve. For example, land-reform policies that promote individual ownership and investment in methods that improve fertility and prevent soil erosion, such as planting trees or terracing, would reduce the risk of famine in drought-affected countries. However, it is in solving such political obstacles that risk reduction has the most to gain. If risk reduction is to remain a global priority, political challenges cannot be ignored.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

66. Current trends in urbanization, environmental degradation and climate change imply that natural and man-made emergencies will continue to increase in their regularity and intensity. Without focused efforts to improve preparedness and response and address risk and vulnerability, the effects of disasters on people and human settlements will become more deadly and costly, trapping millions of people in vicious cycles of poverty and marginalization. The situation calls for more concerted and comprehensive approaches to disaster management that aim to recognize and build national and regional capacity and to emphasize risk reduction as a core principle.

67. While progress has been made in building and coordinating action for risk reduction, it is being achieved against a backdrop of growing exposure and vulnerability to risk. In particular, there remains a significant lack of systematic policies and practices that support local and national response and risk reduction capacities. These require institutional and financial commitment to ensure that disaster risk reduction is more explicitly integrated into development planning and the will to ensure that the more difficult political and structural elements of risk reduction policies are seriously addressed.

68. Such issues will be important considerations at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction, to be held in Kobe, Japan, from 18 to 22 January 2005. The Conference will draw attention to the fact that the prevalence of disasters continues to grow and remains a major obstacle to sustainable development and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. It will also focus on developing practical recommendations to assist countries and the international community in the implementation of improved risk reduction and disaster management. Information on preparatory activities for the Conference can be accessed at www.unisdr.org/wcdr.

69. In the light of these conclusions, the following recommendations for strengthening international assistance to natural disasters merit consideration:

Disaster response

(a) Member States in disaster-prone countries are encouraged to develop national policies and mechanisms for the coordination of search and rescue teams in the event of an earthquake, bearing in mind the INSARAG guidelines and the provisions contained in General Assembly resolution 57/150;

(b) Member States are invited to strengthen cooperation with UNDAC as a valuable tool to maximize international expertise and resources, in order to respond to sudden-onset emergencies and to support the expansion of UNDAC membership, particularly in Africa and among disaster-prone countries;

(c) The United Nations should strengthen the network of regional disaster response advisers and disaster reduction advisers to assist in developing coordinated and complementary regional capacity-building for disaster preparedness, response, mitigation and risk reduction;

(d) The United Nations should strengthen emergency preparedness to anticipate, plan for and mitigate the humanitarian impact of crises through both strengthened emergency preparedness and response capacities by individual agencies and actors and the optimization of those capacities through inter-agency mechanisms such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Sub-Working Group on Preparedness and Contingency Planning;

Building local and regional disaster management capacity

(e) The United Nations, together with its international partners, should strengthen efforts to identify more practical ways to channel resources to and strengthen support for local and national disaster management capacities in disaster-prone countries;

(f) The United Nations should encourage and forge partnerships among regional organizations, including through the network of regional disaster-response advisers, to build regional response and risk reduction capacity;

Information management

(g) The United Nations should address knowledge gaps in disaster management and risk reduction by identifying ways of improving systems and networks for the collection and the analysis of information on disasters, vulnerability and risk and to help inform decision-making;

Risk reduction and sustainable development

(h) Humanitarian and development agencies, together with Member States, should consider concrete ways of factoring risk reduction into areas of development and recovery, particularly in post-disaster recovery;

(i) Member States are encouraged to incorporate risk reduction into development planning and priorities towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals;

Disaster funding

(j) Donors are encouraged to increase overall funding to disaster management, and in particular, should consider channelling a larger proportion of disaster funds into risk-reduction efforts, including response preparedness initiatives;

(k) The United Nations should strengthen support for emergency disaster funding, including by raising the ceiling of the emergency cash grant system from

$50,000 to $100,000 per disaster in an affected country, within the existing resources currently available in the regular budget;

(l) United Nations humanitarian and development agencies should aim for greater coherence in planning and fundraising tools in support of post-disaster crisis recovery, transition and development;

Monitoring and evaluation

(m) The United Nations should further study the international architecture for disaster risk management to improve the response of the international community to preparedness, to natural disasters and to integrating risk assessment and risk-reduction approaches into development programming;

(n) The United Nations system should support research on key issues in disaster risk reduction, such as research on approaches to cost-benefit analysis and options for minimizing hazards and vulnerability;

World Conference on Disaster Reduction

(o) Member States are encouraged to provide ongoing support for the World Conference on Disaster Reduction and to ensure that the opportunity is used to reaffirm and strengthen the implementation of disaster-reduction policy and practices.